Outcome: Make Efficient Use of Urban Land

Indicator 33: Ratio of Land Consumption to Population Growth

Countywide Planning Policy Rationale

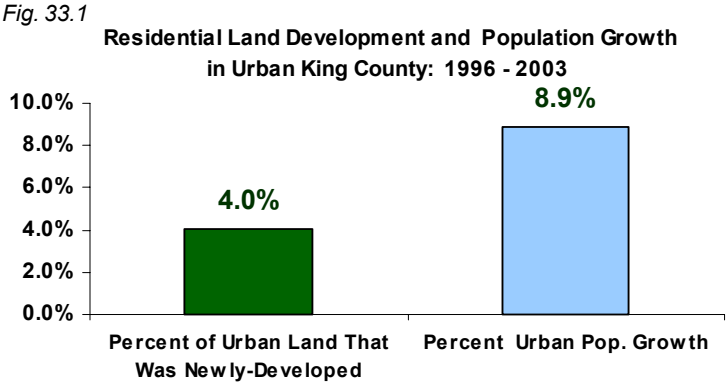
"The land use pattern for the County shall protect the natural environment by reducing the consumption of land and concentrating development." *(CPP FW-6)*

Indicator 33 compares the rate of population growth to the consumption of new land for development during a given period. It is intended to answer the question of whether the remaining undeveloped urban land is being developed at a rate that is less than, or greater than, our rate of population growth. Since the goal is to use urban land efficiently, a rate of land consumption lower than the rate of population growth is desirable.

Measurement of population growth is straightforward. Determining the rate of land consumption is more problematic for two reasons: 1) it is not easy to define what constitutes "consumption" of land (if a large wetland is preserved as part of a new plat, is that acreage "consumed" or "preserved" from development?); 2) there is not one unequivocal measure of whether land that is being developed is truly "newly-developed" (or vacant) land, or if it is at least partially "redeveloped".

The best surrogate measure for newly-developed land is the net acreage of land that is formally-platted during a given period. Some multi-family and commercial-industrial development also takes place on vacant land, without a formal platting process. Much multi-family and commercial development occurs on redeveloped land. We have included 50% of the acres of multifamily development and 50% of the acres of commercial-industrial development, in addition to 100% of the gross acreage of all new plats in the estimation of newly-developed land. This combination should approximate the actual consumption of new land during the period studied. Since much of the gross acreage that is platted actually preserves sensitive areas and open space, this measure is more likely to overestimate than underestimate the amount of newly-developed land.

Fig. 33.1



This graph shows a lower percentage development of urban land and of urban population than was shown last year. This is due to revised figures for both land development and population data, as well as to an additional year's data. See introductory notes on methodology.

Key Trends

- During the eight years from 1996 through 2003, King County's urban population has grown 8.9%, averaging about 1.1% per year. The growth was rapid during the late 1990s, but slowed considerably from 2001-2003.
- In this same period, about 4% of urban land was newly-developed (or "consumed"). This amounts to about 0.5% per year.
- Thus, the ratio of land consumption to population growth was appoximately 1:2. Land was consumed at less than half the rate that the population grew.
- While this trend meets the policy goal of using urban land more efficiently, even greater efficiencies will be needed in the long run, as the available supply of vacant land in King County continues to diminish.
- King County had about 50,100 gross acres of urban residential land available in 2000. Approximately 21,500 acres of that land is considered vacant. Urban land is being developed at an average rate of about 1,400 acres per year.
- As the supply of vacant land is reduced, it is likely that a greater proportion of development will take place on redevelopable land or at higher densities.

Outcome: Make Efficient Use of Urban Land

Indicator 34: Trend in Achieved Density of Residential Development

Countywide Planning Policy Rationale

"All jurisdictions shall make the decisions required to implement the Countywide Planning Policies and their respective comprehensive plans through development regulations." (CPP FW-1, Step 3) "In order to ensure efficient use of the land within the Urban Growth Area...each jurisdiction shall... establish a minimum density (not including critical areas) for new construction in each residential zone." *(CPP LU-66)*

Another way to monitor the efficient use of urban land is to measure how well we are achieving the densities in residential zones that our plans call for. Comparing achieved to planned densities is very useful at the jurisdictional level. However, planned densities vary greatly from zone to zone, and from city to city. At the sub-regional and County level it is more useful to compare average densities achieved currently to those achieved in the recent past.

While building more densely does use land more efficiently, high density neighborhoods, especially in and around urban centers, have a number of other advantages. They support more frequent public transportation, and more local stores and shops; they encourage pedestrian activity to and from local establishments; and they create lively (and sometimes safer) street life.

(continued on page 7)

Indicator 34 (continued)

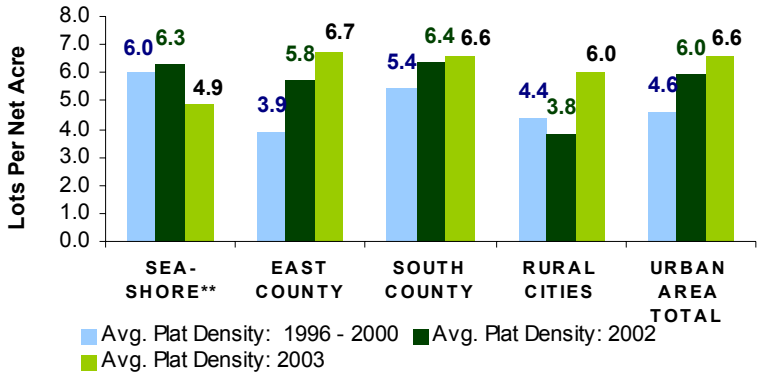
Key Trends

Plat Densities

- In 2003, new lots for single-family homes were created at the overall rate of 6.6 lots per acre throughout the urban area of the County. This is a higher rate than in 2002, and a much higher rate than the 4.6 lots per acre created during the 1996 - 2000 period.
- This improvement in densities achieved on 2003 plats was true in three out of four sub-regions of the County. The only exception was SeaShore, which only had 3 plats with a total of 26 lots created in 2003.
- The most dramatic improvement in plat densities since the 1996 - 2000 period was in the East sub-region which went from an average plat density of 3.9 lots per acre in 1996 - 2000 to 6.7 lots per acre in 2003. The rural cities also improved significantly in 2003, compared to both 1996 - 2000 and to 2002.
- Six dwelling units per acre is considered a benchmark of urban density for single family lots. Densities achieved in new subdivisions are a good predictor of the trend in single-family densities because the number and size of lots determines how many units per acre will eventually be built.

Fig. 34.1

Change in Achieved Densities on Plats: 1996-2000*, 2002, and 2003



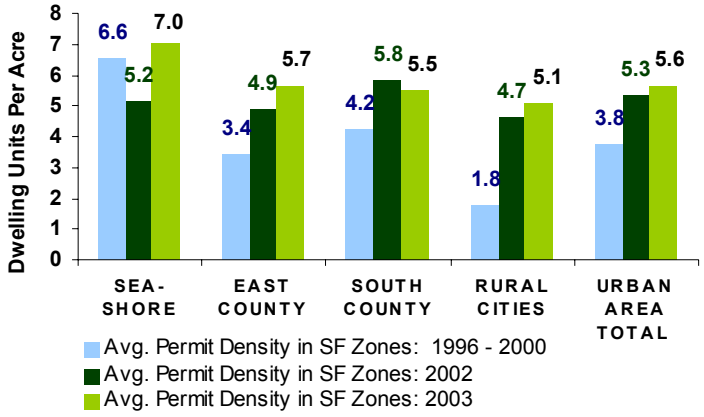
*Blue columns represent average densities achieved over the five-year period from 1996 - 2000. **SeaShore had just 3 plats in 2003, on a total of 5.36 acres. 26 new lots were created.

Permit Densities

- For the whole urban area, densities achieved by new permits in single family zones have increased from 3.8 dwelling units (DU) per acre in the 1996 - 2000 period to 5.6 DU in 2003.

Fig. 34.2

Change in Achieved Densities for Permits in Single Family Zones: 1996-2000, 2002, and 2003



- Permit densities increased in every sub-region from 1996 - 2000 levels. The South sub-region showed a very slight decline from its high of 5.8 DU / acre in 2002.
- In 2003, nearly 1,400 new single family units were created in zones allowing 8 or more DU / acre. These zones contribute significantly to the overall higher single-family densities. These units are often townhome or cottage-style housing.
- Once subdivisions are created it is more difficult to increase single family density in existing residential areas. However, rezones, short plats, and infill development can significantly improve the density in older neighborhoods.
- Densities achieved in multifamily zones in 2003 are higher in every sub-region than they were in the 1996 - 2000 period.
- In comparison to 2002, overall multifamily densities fell from 38.3 to 30.9. All of that decline was in SeaShore which had an unusually high average multifamily density of 77.7 DU / acre in 2002.
- The unusually high 2002 density in SeaShore was most likely the result of very high density high-rise residential buildings that were permitted in Seattle that year.
- While the trend to dense downtown development continues, the 2003 density of 58.5 DU / acre is probably more representative of long-term trends in SeaShore.

Fig. 34.3

Change in Achieved Densities in Multifamily Zones: 1996-2000, 2002, and 2003